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Unfit for History: Race, Reparation and the Reconstruction of American Lyric

Abstract

This article explores how contemporary US black poetics evidences the entanglement of the history of lyric with the history of race. Through readings of the work of Claudia Rankine, Evie Shockley, Tyehimba Jess and Terrance Hayes, I make the case that this poetics situates American lyric within the violence of Reconstruction to imagine how Black Reconstruction may be enacted in cultural form. My contention is this poetics makes lyric "unfit for history" and thus exposes the racialisation processes embedded in poetry's modern life forms. I show how this poetics does not simply recuperate lyric subjectivity but presents a different model of subjectivity altogether, one that is rooted in a fugitive idea of blackness. I locate this lyric from the publication of Shockley's *The New Black* (2011), as a reckoning with the failures of representation that were pronounced in the colour-blind politics of the Obama era and chart it to Hayes' engagement with Trumpian politics in his sonnet sequence *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018). I argue that this contemporary poetics, which makes its argument through a destabilisation of genre, unravels the racialisation processes embedded in the form of reading poetry that Virginia Jackson refers to as "lyricization."

We're out
to repair the future.

– Claudia Rankine, “Weather” (2020).

On 19 June 2019, a congressional hearing in the US House of Representatives took up the perennially contested subject of reparations. The claim, which has been articulated as a form of redress for the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, has been seen as part of a larger programme of restorative justice that is framed in moral, political, and economic terms.¹ Senate Majority Leader Mitch O’Connell voiced a familiar opposition by stating that “no-one alive was currently responsible for that,” eluding to the violence of chattel slavery.² This elision, staged as a refusal to be implicated, is suggestive of the swiftness with which reparation claims are repudiated in contemporary discourse by being presented as an irrational, ahistorical demand. Slavery’s historical narratives are thus, through a rhetorical move, presented as unconnected to the present moment, as if the legal loopholes which, far from ending with Reconstruction, persisted through Jim Crow legislation, were not a continuation of slavery by other means. The

¹ “Slavery Reparations Hearing Ignites Fiery Debate in Congress,” *BBC News*, 19 June 2019, at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-48665802>

² Eugene Scott, “Where Mitch McConnell’s Rationale For Not Exploring Reparations Falls Short,” *Washington Post*, 19 June 2019, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/06/19/where-mitch-mcconnells-rationale-not-exploring-reparations-falls-short/>

case for reparations, which might be defined as redress for “damages inflicted by enslavement and forced racial exclusionary policies,” is presented as a means of accounting for the structural inequalities faced by African Americans in the present and thus the unfinished business of slavery in contemporary American life.³ The case for reparations has been mobilised in the past decade as part of an acknowledgement of the failures of “affirmative action” in the 2000s and the damages inflicted by welfare cuts enacted by the Clinton administration, as a reckoning with America’s own history. Those in favour of the case for reparations have the difficult task of persuading those who are resistant to it – a line that is clearly split on stark racial lines – of how American subjects are implicated in a history of violence.

In Ta-Nehisi Coates’ landmark essay “The Case for Reparations” (2014), he frames reparations as a means of reckoning with “our compounding moral debts:” a framing of the question that implicates its reader in a continuing history of loss and violence. Coates’ essay draws attention to the history of claims made for reparations and demonstrates how questions of slavery continue to manifest in housing policies that have excluded African Americans from the most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage. Coates frames the case for reparations in terms of the “injury gap” that arises from national policies that have marked African American bodies as “targets for legal theft.”⁴ Building the case depends on interweaving the legacies of chattel slavery and Jim Crow-era policies with a contemporaneous history of inequality, discrimination and incarceration in the United States to demonstrate how the financial gains reaped by slavery continue to manifest in segregation by other means. In this argument, the case for reparations is not only directed towards a redress that accounts for how the foundation of America has been built on a

³ “Slavery Reparations Hearing Ignites Fiery Debate in Congress”.

⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, 26 June 2014, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

history of slavery but also acknowledges how the “Jim Crow South was the one collaborator,” as Ira Katznelson argues, “America’s democracy could not do without.”⁵

The subject of reparations has come into particular focus in the past decade at a time when ideas of America’s greatness have been re-scripted into white national imaginaries. The desire to redress the wrongs of slavery, which continue to impinge on contemporary African American life, has resulted not only in the increasing familiarization of publications that refer to reparations, but to the re-centring of blackness as a “structure of feeling,” as Alys Eve Weinbaum writes, “produced in reaction to the particular forms of racism that structure the racial formation within the United States.”⁶ Though the question of reparations is often imagined in political and economic terms, it has been posed in recent years most insistently as a cultural question which makes conspicuous how blackness has been absorbed into cultural production. In African American artist Cameron Rowland’s 2018 work *Depreciation*, the question of reparations is taken up as an ongoing story of deferred redress and dispossession. In the art work, which is presented through a set of documents, one acre of land on Edisto Island, South Carolina – land that was formerly part of the Maxcy Place plantation, which fell under General William Tecumseh Sherman’s “40 acres and a mule” slavery reparations project instituted in 1865, is actively devalued to the sum of \$0. Cameron places the question of reparations within the realm of the aesthetic, demonstrating how the failed – or perennially deferred – demand for reparations has resulted in a continuing epidemic of dispossession in the contemporary United States, a dispossession that he imaginatively enacts through cultural work that bears an ironic relation to history.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 223.

Analysing the cultural production that emerges in response to the convergence between the optimism of the Obama years, the bleak realities of racial politics in the mid-2010s and this reparative turn, this article turns its attention to African American cultural production's relation to historical knowledge. It evidences this relationship, specifically, as it manifests in contemporary US black poetics where the question of reparations is entangled with the evidencing of the racism that is constitutive of American poetry's modern life form. Through readings of recent work by Evie Shockley, Terrance Hayes and Tyehimba Jess, it demonstrates how the history of poetic genre is mobilised to articulate an alternative way of thinking about blackness and belonging: one that allows us to see black subjectivity as an aesthetic function that reorients poetry's history towards an unforeclosed future. My interest is, more specifically, in how innovation in contemporary US black poetics is synonymous with the articulation of a fugitive blackness, which is negotiated in these poets' work through an ironic relation to history that moves beyond the "melancholic historicism" that characterises much black literary production, as Stephen Best has argued, of the past three decades.⁷ My contention is that this ironic historical relation is enacted most persistently at the level of genre, opening up the question, in particular, of what is this thing we call "lyric," and what is its relation to the historical production of blackness?⁸ When Shockley, Hayes and Jess work within strict verse forms, they do so with a defiance of generic conventions; as a refusal to turn, in Amiri Baraka's sense, and as a satirising of received ideas and forms. More particularly, they show how the conventions of genre can be transformed as they are subject to the ambivalence of a pluralist black poetic tradition.⁹

⁷ Stephen Best, *None Like US: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 68.

⁸ Stephen Burt, "What is This Thing Called Lyric?," *Modern Philology* 113.3, 422-440 (423).

⁹ For more on Baraka's idea of "turning," see: Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171.

I want to demonstrate, then, how contemporary US black poetics, which understands lyric as an abstraction and as an unnatural history that is entangled with modern processes of racialization, produces a new way of thinking about the relationship between lyric and history. More simply put: the contingency of the term “lyric” in this new poetics evidences the racialized history of lyric which allows it to be read, as Virginia Jackson writes, as “indisputably literary without also being apparently raced.”¹⁰ This contractual operation, through which “poetry is made out of historical silences,” is brought into view conspicuously at the turn of the twentieth century in the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar who, as Jackson illuminates, “creates what will become the mainstay of twentieth-century lyric reading.”¹¹ The spectre of the ballad and the abstraction of lyric in Dunbar’s work evidence the unacknowledged place of race in lyricization: the term that Jackson uses to refer to the process by which all poems are read as “lyric.”¹²

In her reading of Dunbar, Jackson demonstrates how the fantasy of Reconstruction, which as Henry Louis Gates Jr argues, still shapes America, is entangled with poetry’s role in creating an “imagined community” of readers by which “certain kinds of poems came to *stand for* certain kinds of social experience.”¹³ Because the reading of lyric as an abstraction masks a violent contemporary history, the re-materialisation of the processes that make a poem read as lyric are entangled with the legacy of this fantasy in the American imaginary.¹⁴ To adopt Dunbar’s famous line “We Wear the Mask,” the African American poet’s relation to lyric tradition will always be an ironic one that articulates the promise of “Black Reconstruction.” In a footnote to the essay, Jackson draws a connective line between Dunbar’s use of the ballad form and the racism that continues to define American poetics, and Rankine’s “extremely stylish and incisive treatment”

¹⁰ Virginia Jackson, “Specters of the Ballad,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 71.2 (2016), 176-196 (191).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 184, 194.

¹² Virginia Jackson, “Lyric,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 833.

¹³ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “How Reconstruction Still Shapes America,” *Time*, 2 April 2019, at <https://time.com/5562869/reconstruction-history/>

¹⁴ Michael Cohen, “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Genres of Dialect,” *African American Review* 41 (2007), 247-257 (247).

of that landscape.”¹⁵ This article is an elaboration and contextualisation of that footnote that works backwards to the moment charted in Jackson’s work to think about how race is entangled with the relationship between poetic genre and the making of history. Rather than poetry making itself out of historical silences, then, this contemporary US black poetics conceptualises history as a dynamic process, as something that is not simply there for the excavation, but which is instead knowledge that is constantly being made, unmade and remade.

This poetics brings into view the particular entanglement between the lyric self and the historical self, as they intersect with ideas of racialisation. This situation is articulated most clearly in the occupation of the lyric “I” by the second-person address in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) which not only facilitates the “unstable collapse” of private and public speech, as Jonathan Elmer argues, but it brings the historical formation of lyric into focus so that the “racial unconscious” of lyric is brought to the surface of contemporary US poetic production.¹⁶ *Citizen* works through a series of “situations” in which the speaker is silenced by moments when a black subject is affected by “the full force of [their] American positioning.”¹⁷ The refiguration of lyric in this contemporary poetics might be read, I contend, as the emergence of the historical relation of the speaker and her interlocutor’s subject position into the lyric encounter:

A friend argues that Americans battle between the “historical self” and the “self self.” By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning[...]. And though your joined personal histories are supposed to save you from misunderstandings, they usually cause you to understand all too well what is meant.¹⁸

¹⁵ Jackson, “Specters of the Ballad,” 181.

¹⁶ Jonathan Elmer, “Public Humanities in the Age of the Ideas Industry and the Rise of the Creatives,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 85.4 (2016), 109-117 (116).

¹⁷ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

“Personal histories” – the historiography on which feminism depends for its political force – here founders in the face of the irruption of the historical self in everyday discourse. Rankine’s use of the intimate conversation serves as a way to demonstrate how historical continuities underpin how personal histories are understood. This contemporary poetics situates its construction of lyric subjectivity at the interstice between the “historical self” and the “self self” to demonstrate how they are mutually implicated and how the idea of the universal transcendental lyric subject depends on fictions of transparency that erase the historical realities that the reader is pressed to imagine. The emergence of the “space of otherness” which proves crucial to “the order of race,” as it emerges in the post-Enlightenment era, as Sylvia Wynter argues, is thus exposed as embedded in the modern lyric subject’s emergence as the pinnacle of the transcendental and the human.¹⁹

In what follows, I build on the work of a number of important recent studies that address how lyric has been mobilised, critiqued and taken up in contemporary US black poetics. Where Anthony Reed reads this poetics as “postlyric,” and Mary-Jean Chan reads it as “hybridized lyric,” my interest instead, extending Nikki Skillman’s reading of *Citizen*, is in its relation to the process of lyricization.²⁰ But whereas Skillman brilliantly illuminates the implication of this contemporary poetics in terms of its affective production, I turn my attention to its relation to historical knowledge. My interest here is specifically in thinking about how the history of genre intersects with the history of race, and how this intersection crystallises around the idea of “lyric,” which, as Reed argues, is underwritten by racially encoded aesthetic values which determine what kind of cultural production is deemed worthy and important.²¹ This poetics,

¹⁹ Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Before *Man*: Sylvia Wynter’s Rewriting of the Modern Episteme,” in Sylvia Wynter: *On Being Human as Praxis* ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 91.

²⁰ Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 2014), 97; Mary-Jean Chan, “Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma: Lyric Hybridity in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*,” *Journal of American Studies* 52.1 (2018), 137-163; Nikki Skillman, “Lyric Reading Revisited: Passion, Address and Form in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*,” *American Literary History* 31.3 (2019), 419-457.

²¹ Reed, *Freedom Time*, 98.

then, shows how “racial interpellation,” as Dorothy Wang argues in her study of how the poetry of racialised subjects is invariably read in terms of “identity politics,” rather than form and genre, “is absolutely inescapable in the formation of American subjectivity, not just the subjectivity of “visible minorities.”²²

For Reed, the postlyric “represents a dialectical interruption of the lyric mode,” where genre is “cited” without “participating in it.”²³ He reads Rankine’s and Douglas Kearney’s work as an interruption of lyric production, demonstrating the “knowledge on which the fiction of the lyric’s expressive subject relies, including its singularity.” For Reed, this new poetics hinges on its relation to genre: it renders lyric a site of contestation at the same time that it “requires the rule of genre for its legibility.”²⁴ In this way, “the postlyric simultaneously belongs to and rejects the lyric mode.” My reading of contemporary US black poetics echoes Reed’s and continues his line of thought in tracing the relationship between blackness and new forms of experimentalism. But I also want to contest the usefulness of the rubric of the term “postlyric” in Reed’s otherwise illuminating study insofar as its stress on newness overlooks how these poems reckon with the history of lyric in order not simply to contest its generic form but to open up a new relationship between lyric and history. Indeed, Reed articulates it thus: the “yoking” of “lyric time to terrestrial or historical time” reveals the racialisation implicit in poetic history: and, indeed, in abstractions of all kinds; but it might also provide a form in which to imagine a new relation between past and present, and a more ambivalent relation to the idea of Americanness.²⁵

Contemporary US black poetics, then, exposes the ways in which “lyric” is a fictional production that has been historically mobilised to bolster ideals of transcendent white humanity, particularly

²² Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 30.

²³ Reed, *Freedom Time*, 97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

as they constellate around the fantasy of the universal lyric speaker who operates as the stand-in for the sanctity of white interiority against which blackness is cast as its otherness. Written against a circumscribed notion of what “black aesthetics” might be, this contemporary poetics is embedded in the active production of a poetics that is, as Evie Shockley writes, “produced by the experience of identifying or being interpolated as ‘black’ in the US,” placing an emphasis on “actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society.”²⁶ Blackness in contemporary US poetics in its reparative mode does not simply recuperate lyric subjectivity but presents a different model of subjectivity altogether, one that is rooted, as Fred Moten writes, in the “fugitive law of movement that makes black social life ungovernable.”²⁷

This essay takes up the work of three American writers in this emergent tradition: Shockley, Terrance Hayes and Tyehimba Jess each reshape lyric through a restaging of moments of American history that continue to play out in the present: a restaging that I refer to as “lyric reconstruction,” suggestively dovetailing the idea of the reworked lyric in dialogue with the analysis set out in W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction of America between 1860 and 1880*. Engaging with the postbellum literary reconstruction of the US, this poetics exposes how the origin of a distinctive “American” literary production newly written by “American” people produced an “imagined community” that was constituted through racism. In other words, it levers a fruitful gap between the terms “American” and “poetry,” allowing for those terms to be otherwise claimed. Contemporary US black poetics destabilises American literary history, making its enduring characters unfit for the present. In the work of Shockley, Hayes and Jess, the most traditional of lyric verse genres – the sonnet – is given new life as it is ironically mobilised to render audible the historical persistence of racist formulations. In Jess’ work the syncopated sonnet provides a countermovement to the appropriation of the blues in white cultural

²⁶ Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 9.

²⁷ Fred Moten, “The Case for Blackness,” *Criticism* 50.2 (Spring 2008), 177-218 (179).

production, whilst in Hayes' work, the sonnet becomes the occasion to articulate lyric's embeddedness in the persistence of chattel slavery in contemporary forms of incarceration and with the articulation of a black male hysteria which has been produced and contained by imprisoning forms.

I. The Drag of Lyric Time

In Stephen Best's *None Like Us* (2018) he articulates how the fugitivity of blackness "derives from bearing a negative relation to [history]" which, he argues, necessitates an orientation to the past which, rather than melancholy, might be "perverse, queer, askew."²⁸ I mobilise Best's term to conceptualise lyric's relationship to history. My use of lyric, then, seeks to account for the unfitness of the term. But it also argues that this unfitness is the grounds on which poetry might not participate in the historical erasure of violence in the contemporary. To make lyric unfit for history is, paradoxically, a way to open up a new lyric historicity that might articulate a reparative cultural logic and, in so doing, disclose how lyric innovation hinges on its relation to blackness. The move I make here – to posit lyric as a genre – is one that is controversial: there are few histories that are more uncertain and contested than that of lyric. Indeed, Paul de Man confidently asserts that "lyric is not a genre, but one name among several to designate the defensive notion of the understanding, the possibility of future hermeneutics."²⁹

I want both to engage with de Man's provocation whilst also grappling with the ways in which contemporary US black poetics specifically names a new lyric tradition to argue that the

²⁸ Best, *None Like Us*, 65.

²⁹ Paul de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 261.

possibility of future hermeneutics that de Man identifies might lie precisely in this act of refiguration figured as the innovation of lyric tradition as it accommodates black subjectivity. The black aesthetics that is foregrounded in this poetic mode thus contests the view that the process of “lyricization is largely irreversible,” opening up a new lyric pedagogy so that we might begin to recognise poems as lyric that look entirely unlike those objects of “lyric reading” institutionalised in the twentieth-century literary academy.³⁰ The contestable nature of what counts as lyric is here brought into relation with the conceptual and experiential opening that blackness performs on literary history – and on American literary history, in particular. I read this contemporary poetics, then, as an ahistorical way of thinking about genre, where the history of lyric becomes readable in its unfitness for history: a historical reading that depends on an understanding of lyric as much as an idea as a genre; or rather, as, Jackson argues, as the transformation of an idea into a genre, which results in the fixing and the unfixing of literary history.

Lyric, as Jackson notes, “has profoundly influenced how we understand the history of all poetic genres.”³¹ It might be best understood as a “persistent confusion” that has, nonetheless, “proven enormously generative for both poets and critics.” This is, in part, because calling things lyric expresses a desire for things to be read according to a certain tradition, often coded as white, and lyric is deeply imbricated with our understanding of subjectivity, interiority and emotion. My argument here is not so much that lyric is readily identifiable as a category as that the reworking of lyric reveals that it has been better fit for other forms of cultural expression all along. Most conspicuous amongst the innovations of this contemporary US black poetics is a move from lyric’s production of privacy to the situation of the construction of privacy at the heart of publicness, and from an emphasis on wonder to an emphasis on shock: on an emotional

³⁰ Burt, “What is This Thing Called Lyric?” 423.

³¹ Jackson, “Lyric,” 826.

response that is withheld or amplified to the point of explosion (the kind of emotional response that, as Coates has argued, Obama could never articulate within the codes of the black presidency).³² The strange generic understanding of lyric as the site of confusion is taken up to produce a new kind of affective and generic confusion that reveals, with a startling clarity, how race has been central to stabilising the illusion of lyric's historical fictions. The spectacle of colour-blindness in the present is the scene wherein I read this new lyric reconstruction as a "contemporary drag of genre," which Theodore Martin argues manifests across contemporary literature.³³ The drag of lyric in the contemporary, then, provides a way to think about how poetry's reckoning with its own history plays out as a question of genre. The drag of lyric as a genre might be specifically useful to a reparative cultural understanding of lyric's race relations insofar as it makes blackness the place to think about the drag of history in the present.

Lyric is, then, not an abstraction in these poets' work but the thing that transforms and the thing that is transformative. In a 2018 interview, Hayes figures lyric not as a mode of reading, or as a textualized object, but as a moment that is converted into something more sustainable:

Where there's an experience, I'm thinking: Is this going to be converted into a lyric moment?

I'm trying to create out of these twenty-second lyric bursts a narrative that holds together.³⁴

Rankine has assumed a particular claim on the contemporary "American lyric," having mobilised the term as the subtitle of her books *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014), in a move that is understood as both reparative and ironic. In an interview, she expresses her interest in the transformation of the privacy of lyric into its more public form ("I didn't want it to be

³² Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 139.

³³ Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 2.

³⁴ Jeffrey J. Williams, "Terrance Hayes on Shakespeare, Ol' Dirty Bastard and What Makes a Good MFA," *LitHub*, 9 May 2018, at <https://lithub.com/terrance-hayes-on-shakespeare-ol-dirty-bastard-and-what-makes-a-good-mfa/>

traditionally lyric because I wasn't trying to create an internalized consciousness"), which is also a way of taking lyric outside of its historical preserve ("I love finding the lyric in non-traditional spaces").³⁵ Much has been written on the implicating force of Rankine's mode of lyric address but this leveraging of lyric might be understood to be not only about the white reader's guilt and shame, but also about the historical freight of the term lyric and its relation to the process of lyricization. If the abstraction of "lyric" implicates it in the production of racism and historical silences, its recursive temporal loops and its generic uncertainty, nonetheless, allow us to attend to America's spectral forms and to the historical situation of the continual weathering of black life in the present.

In Rankine's recent poem "Weather," written in response to the intersecting climate of black social death, protests and the pandemic, the poem is oriented "not for yesterday, but for the weather that's here."³⁶ The poem opens by attempting to read a document in the archive: its message does not readily yield any useful information; it rather suggests that, in fact, what history exposes is our forgetfulness and that traditional readings of history might not be appropriate to the kind of knowledge that we need in the face of "the drought of information." The unyielding nature of this archival reading, and by extension of conventional understandings of history, is directly related in the poem to the asphyxiation which Rankine places at the centre of the poem, which references the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020. The promise of this poetics is that it attends to the past only insofar as it orients the reader "to repair the future." This anarchival poetics – like revolutionary black subjectivity – depends on the impossibility of pinning it down: another way of understanding history comes into view in its call to untimeliness. The unravelling of lyric's fictional abstraction thus produces the counterhistory of

³⁵ David L. Ulin, "Claudia Rankine: The Art of Poetry: No. 102," *Paris Review* 219 (Winter 2016), at <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6905/the-art-of-poetry-no-102-claudia-rankine>

³⁶ Claudia Rankine, "Weather," *New York Times*, 15 June 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/books/review/claudia-rankine-weather-poem-coronavirus.html> [accessed 18 August 2020].

lyric which lyricization has occluded. Lyric's ahistorical historicization is the grounds on which the atemporal nature of black reconstruction finds its present tense.

Contemporary black US poetic production, then, mobilises genre as an explanatory prism for understanding the political present. To make lyric unfit for history is, paradoxically a way to reopen the relationship between poetry and history; between, more particularly, African American history and the history of the lyric subject. Contemporary US black poetics returns us insistently to the failed promise of Reconstruction, and its contemporary legacy in the Obama-era politics of colour-blindness. It might, in this way, model the alternative mode of recovery that Best articulates theoretically. Against the failure of Reconstruction, Du Bois articulates a "Black Reconstruction," which positions African Americans as historical actors, and which shows that the black freedom struggle was central to safeguarding the ideals of American democracy.³⁷ Analysing Reconstruction was so important for Du Bois because he saw it as *the* historical moment in the construction of modern capitalism. The reframing of the history of Reconstruction was, as Cedric Robinson argues, "part of his beginning of the transformation of the historiography of American civilization—the renaming of things" which would allow for American history to be otherwise interpreted.³⁸

II. "The New Black"

I want to contextualise the use of lyric in contemporary US black poetics as emerging in relation to, and complicating, the optimism of "the new Black" that the Obama era was held to

³⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 15.

³⁸ Cedric Robinson, "A Critique of W. E. B. Du Bois' Black Reconstruction," *The Black Scholar* 8.7 (May 1977), 44-50.

represent. The recuperation of “lyric” from its abstraction in twentieth-century poetic forms is, then, related to the leveraging of the unanswerable and unanswered questions, affective knots and intensities, that are screened by black liberal representation. Otherwise phrased: the unnatural history of lyric is a key site through which contemporary US black poetics articulates its challenge to the silencing of history that is implicit in the optimism of a “post-race” America that the Obama presidency promised.³⁹ The affective pull of this optimism is felt on the eve of Obama’s election in Elizabeth Alexander’s “Rally” (2008), where the collective black lyric address gets swept up in this fervour, expressed in the closing lines of the poem:

What it meant or would mean was not yet fixed
nor could be, though human beings ever tilt toward *we*.⁴⁰

By Obama’s second term, this reparative imaginary (figured most explicitly in the image of women knitting in Alexander’s 2009 inaugural poem “Praise Song for the Day”) was supplanted by a poetics marked instead by a social critique of the continuance of anti-black violence under a black president. Coupled with the disappointment in the face of the change that the black presidency did not bring about was the concurrent questioning of the legitimacy of Obama’s presidency, which newly brought into focus the relationship between blackness and American citizenship, expressed by Karla Holloway as: “What does it mean to be ‘natural’? Does it modify ‘born,’ or is it a particular kind of nominative? And how might a ‘citizen’ be qualified?”⁴¹ In the face of the illusion of “post-racial” politics, the unfinished business of race relations during this period intensified.

The critique of the failure of post-racial politics is taken up most conspicuously in Shockley’s *the new black* (2011), a book that is tonally ironic, formally experimental, ranging from mesostics,

³⁹ For more on the limitations of the term “post-race,” see Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmonds, eds., *The Trouble with Post-Blackness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Alexander, *Crave Radiance: New and Selected Poems 1990-2012* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2012), 246.

⁴¹ Karla Holloway, *Legal Fictions: Constituting Race, Composing Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

elegies, to haikus and shape poems, and which explicitly engages with the false promise of black representation in the White House through returning to literature's historical emergence in relation to the violent history of the United States and the black labour on which its definitions of liberty depend. This poetic virtuosity shuttles between influential early voices in African American literature – drawing on material from Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative and Phillis Wheatley's poems – and contemporary figures to create a new "grammar book" of American lyric. This poetics of historical dependency reveals the idea of America as more entangled with violence and subjugation than with the freedom it purports to defend. The ironic force of this historical relation is emphasised by the formal virtuosity of the poems which prove that black aesthetics can be variously and expansively interpreted. In her 2005 essay "All of the Above: Multiple Choice and African American Poetry," Shockley calls out the double bind that black poets have found themselves in, from Wheatley to her own "multiple choice" generation, as she refers to those born at the end of the Civil Rights movement. "It's striking," as Henry Louis Gates Jr observes of Wheatley's historical position in relation to lyric, that Jefferson and Amiri Baraka, two figures in American letters who agreed on little else, could concur in terms of their condemnation of Phillis Wheatley."⁴²

"The poetics litmus test," Shockley writes, "judges the poems we write and the poetics we espouse against a fairly rigid standard and declares us to be basically one kind of poet or another:" "authentically black" or "universally American," but never both.⁴³ Being both is the wager of this encyclopaedic collection of poetic forms. In *Renegade Poetics*, published the same year as *the new black*, Shockley theorises the strange contradictory relationship between blackness and innovation that has been "dismissed, marginalised and misread" in literary history. This

⁴² Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Civitas Books, 2003), 83.

⁴³ Cited in Christopher Spaide, "History Lessons: Evie Shockley's 'semiautomatic' and Ange Mlinko's 'Distant Mandate,'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 16 Jan. 2019, at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/history-lessons-evie-shockleys-semiautomatic-and-ange-mlinkos-distant-mandate/>

dismissal is accounted for either, she notes, “in relation to the African American poetic tradition, because its experiences were not recognizably ‘black’” or, alternately, “in relation to the constructions of the avant-garde tradition, because they were.”⁴⁴ Important in this theorisation of the double bind of innovation and blackness is the contestation of the idea that there is a unified, identifiable “we” that speaks from this tradition. Moving away from the spectre of ghostly collectivity, Shockley locates an innovative black poetic production in her renegade stance to the American poetic tradition. What gets lost in so much theorising of black innovation, as she observes, is “the historical context in which the concept of a black aesthetic, per se, was first expressed.”⁴⁵ In *the new black*, Shockley returns to these moments to establish a new set of cultural reference points for contemporary US black poetics. Implicit in this poetics, then, is a black innovation that will not be assimilated into white cultural production and which produces an understanding of lyric history that might be framed as the question that Alexander poses: “what is made possible in poetry’s wake?”⁴⁶

the new black, which carves out a workable language for blackness against a colour-blind landscape, works a lyric historicity of survival against the utopian spirit of the Obama years. The collection opens with “my last modernist poem, #4 (or, re-re-birth of a nation),” the most ironic articulation of the promise of a black presidency framed in the language of D.W. Griffiths’ 1915 white supremacist film *Birth of a Nation*, infamously screened in the White House for President Woodrow Wilson, who reportedly praised the film that erases the facts of slavery and Reconstruction as “writing history with lightning.”⁴⁷ The first work of US cinematic realism presents itself as the most violent of racial fantasies in the image of the Ku Klux Klan depriving

⁴⁴ Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Alexander, “New Ideas about Black Experimental Poetry,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 50.4 (2011), at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-index?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0050.424;g=mqr;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1>

⁴⁷ On the contestation of the origins of this line, see: Mark E. Benbow, “Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and ‘Like Writing History Like Lightning,’” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 9.4 (October 2010), 509-533.

African Americans of their voting rights and enforcing the colour line through violence. The form of “my last modernist poem, #4,” the fourth in an occasional series of texts that Shockley calls “so-nots” because “they look like sonnets but they’re not,” works against the unrelenting reproduction of this violent fantasy as America’s origin story of race becomes an unending history of violent reproduction, the insistence of which is found within the poem’s forceful internal repetition. Writing against the optimism of the Obama years, the poem prophetically imagines how “the end of race” will engender “a lethal spring coiled in the snow.”⁴⁸ Shockley ingeniously carves out a tight lyric form that makes the lyric line coextensive with the false promise encoded in the postracial: the end of race, articulated as “a finish(ed) line we might / finally limp across.”

Against this false promise, Shockley wields “the fact of blackness,” expressed most clearly in “ode to my blackness,” where blackness is viewed as ushering in something beyond lyric subjectivity: “without you, I would be just / a self of my former shadow,” she concludes.⁴⁹ In other words, without blackness, her poetry would just be ordinarily lyric. Here, blackness occupies the place of address: a blackness that does not stabilise white privacy is one that instead ushers in an entirely new way of seeing. It is, as Shockley writes, “not the *object seen* as black, but *what black-identified people see through the lens of their blackness*.”⁵⁰ Shockley understands the power of the image and her poetry poses black subjectivity in American life as a question that must be asked formally. Her work locates this formal question in the interface between image and text: in the affective tension that is produced through the implicit understanding of poetry as inherently lyric and race as implicitly visual. In a recent essay, she frames this tension within a larger category of cultural production that she refers to as “black graphics,” with its dual focus on the

⁴⁸ Evie Shockley, *the new black* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁰ Evie Shockley, “On Seeing and Reading the ‘Nothing’: Poetry and Blackness Visualized,” *New Literary History* 50.4 (Autumn 2019), 499-528 (500).

verbal and the visual, which she locates specifically in the era of colour-blindness which “calls for a disavowal of the visibility of racialized bodies.”⁵¹

This act of putting lyric poetry on display – of a lyric that mediates the visual – is one that illuminates the visual regimes of slavery that continue to inform how citizenship operates and how blackness is represented in the present. In “dependencies,” the mastery of lyric from the position of blackness allows for a historic visualisation of the structure of racialised labour on which the operations of former US President Thomas Jefferson’s family home Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia depend for their domestic order. The dependencies that Shockley names are specifically Jefferson’s notorious relationship with Sally Hemmings and his exploitation of her husband James Hemmings whose suicide is the unreadable event of this story of enforced racialised labour that is the scaffolding on which “liberty” – the codeword that Jefferson bestows to the nation – is upheld. Shockley situates her reparative lyric as the ironic finding of common ground with the primary author of the Declaration of Independence and, more particularly, as a dialogic engagement with Wheatley, whose poetry Jefferson famously dismissed:

rights, that among

like you i read the poetry
of that good christian phillis wheatley
her ode to George Washington the one
who freed his slaves

these are life

you promised james hemmings
his freedom if he would
return with you from France
(where he was free) and teach (enslaved)
others the french style of cooking
i hear. you were good
as your word

liberty

James Hemmings trained his brother Peter, completed an inventory of the

⁵¹ Ibid., 502.

*kitchen, and left Monticello in February 1796. Word came in 1801 that he had “committed an act of suicide.”*⁵²

Wheatley makes an appearance, too, in the poem “post-white,” where she orients lyric towards the possibility of black innovation in constrained circumstances before the moment of “dred scott’s claim of citizenship,” referring to the landmark Supreme Court case that ruled that the US constitution was not intended to include American citizenship for black people.⁵³

Shockley’s lyric historicity works against the moment when aesthetic objects – here specifically poetry’s historical fixity as a lyric object – becomes deeply entwined with the political economy of slavery, which underwrites the casting out of blackness from the realm of citizenship which continues, as Simon Gikandi argues, to “haunt the narrative of modern identity.”⁵⁴ Jefferson’s notion of liberty is in direct contradiction with that enshrined in the black radical tradition, and these two definitions of freedom are spatialised on the page and made coexistent, though not ultimately compatible. The poem enacts its own fugitive freedom in its relation to the past, articulated as the historicising of the white domestic ideology of freedom at the heart of American political ideas of liberty which depends on the diverse community that included as many as 140 enslaved men, women, and children who coexisted within the domestic space of Monticello. In this way, Shockley reminds us of the historical contexts out of which the insistence on the term “African American” emerged as it pertains to the production of spaces of interiority – of which lyric is the foremost cultural object.

Wheatley has become an important figure in the past two decades of African American scholarship, and the drive to historically illuminate the strangeness of Wheatley’s primacy in African American letters, and American letters alike, is coeval with a renewed interest in lyric,

⁵² Shockley, *the new black*, 25.

⁵³ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁴ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3.

and lyric's relationship to race, in particular. Writing about Wheatley, as a historical yet uncertain point of origin, involves a certain amount of speculation at the same time that there are, unlike much of the archive of slavery, fixed points of reference in historical time that locates her lyric at a critical moment in America's political inception. Relocating "the primal scene of African-American letters" to Wheatley's shaping of political questions of freedom and bondage in the American lyric, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes, orients black studies away from the irrecoverable loss of slavery towards the primacy of blackness at the inception of American lyric.⁵⁵ The situation of discussions of Wheatley's work, which might even have disrupted a crucial political meeting during a colonial crisis, illuminates the entanglement of American lyric within the nexus of colonial power as it produces blackness at this moment.⁵⁶ Blackness' legibility in lyric unfolds in the midst of a colonial political crisis, which is to say, that thinking back through Wheatley involves the heady syntactical swirl of the "difficult miracle of black poetry in America," as June Jordan expresses it: "How could you, belonging to no one, but property to those despising the smiles of your soul, how could you dare to create yourself: a poet?"⁵⁷

"The black woman's critique of history," as Hazel Carby writes, "has not only involved us coming to terms with 'absences'; we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us."⁵⁸ We hear this outrage most overtly in Shockley's sense of what Shirley Chisholm might have had – "a room—a trust—of her own: / the oval office: democracy's throne."⁵⁹ Or rather what she, in that historical impossibility articulated as a future possibility, might yet bring about in the genealogy of black feminist political thought (the colon, and the double colon in *the new black* and Shockley's subsequent collection *semiautomatic* (2018) are

⁵⁵ Gates Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, 5.

⁵⁶ Joanna Brooks, "Our Phillis, Ourselves," *American Literature* 82.1 (March 2010), 1-28.

⁵⁷ June Jordan, "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America: Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley," *Poetry Foundation*, 15 Aug. 2006, at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68628/the-difficult-miracle-of-black-poetry-in-america>

⁵⁸ Hazel V. Carby, "White Women Listen!" Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1982), 212-235. (212).

⁵⁹ Shockley, *the new black*, 25.

articulated somewhere between historic causation and an indicator of future possibility; a reminder of the stakes of black grammar in lyric speech). But we also hear it in the voices and the desires that are less readily available to historical memory and that specifically centre women in the history of black letters and politics: as in the letter-poem from Douglass to his daughter where her receipt of the letter is left implicit. These black female figures – the historical interlocutors of this black feminist poetics – are neither made to speak nor left spectral, but rather their implication in the scene – or rather, to borrow Shockley’s term, a dependency that has not yet been thoroughly accounted for – is enabled through this anarchival mode. Shockley’s lyric weaves together Jefferson’s dismissal of Wheatley, and Douglass’s marriage to Helen Pitts, with the entanglement of race and reproduction that is at the heart of the exploitation of black domestic labour in white ideology that ruptured, as Hortense Spillers has argued, the African American family.⁶⁰

“Dependencies” is the theoretical framework through which Shockley most explicitly addresses the continuation of the dynamic of slavery in contemporary American life: the idea of dependency reveals the fiction encoded in the language of liberty that underpins the US Constitution. In the words that spiral down the right-hand margin, the tension contained with the lines “life // (enslaved) // liberty” speaks of lyric’s own formal constriction, and the recuperation of blackness from that constriction, as it occupies the building of Jefferson’s Monticello: as an internal echo chamber of the “points of intersection between Jefferson’s family and enslaved people.”⁶¹ It is not so much a lyric recovery as a refusal to disappear into history. The poem anarchivally illustrates what it might mean to situate a reparative political thought in thinking back through these dependencies, which is to say, in accounting for reproductive as well as productive labour. Chisholm – the political figure who is positioned as what “the new black”

⁶⁰ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987), 64-81.

⁶¹ Shockley, *the new black*, 25.

in politics might yet still look like – is the guiding force for a new black lyric which locates in the past a non-coincident but dialogic framework to articulate the exhausting, non-exhaustive incessant work of living while black.

Bringing the inexorable repetition of lyric history into the present collapses the historical distance between 1896 – the year of *Plessy v Ferguson* – and 2007, between the antebellum south and New York, revealing America's relation to blackness as one continuous repetitive, geographically expansive loop. Writing against what cannot be recovered of this history, and yet which still remains troublesome and present about it, Shockley's "new black" presents a counterhistory to the definitions of slavery and freedom enshrined in lyric tradition and the American political tradition alike, through a generic reckoning with the genre that has been most associated with the enshrining of white privacy. The historical debt that is owed to Wheatley and to Chisholm becomes the grounds on which a lyric that is unfit for history historicises revolutionary possibility in order to imagine a new idea of liberty that is carved out of the exceptionalism of blackness. "Dependencies" would find its most ironic prophetic articulation of the colour-blind era when, during a 2014 visit to Monticello, Obama declared that "Jefferson represents what's best in America" while conceding the "complex relations" he had "to slavery."⁶²

III. Double Time

Shockley's *semiautomatic*, which was written, like Hayes' *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018), in the heat and fury of the inception of the Trump presidency, articulates most

⁶² "Remarks by President Obama and President Hollande of France After Touring Thomas Jefferson's Monticello," The White House Speeches & Remarks, 10 Feb. 2014, at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/10/remarks-president-obama-and-president-hollande-france-after-touring-thom>

clearly, at the level of the poetry collection, what it means for a poem to incite a riot: for poetry to be not simply conceived as a formal “poem,” but as the momentum of revolt. The opening poem of *semiautomatic* frames this question specifically as calling for a limit point to the blues: to locate a new black experimentalism not in the inexorable melancholic momentum of the blues, but rather in the revolt and its affective equivalent: rage. A reckoning with the legacies of the blues in contemporary US black poetics is, too, addressed at the level of genre in Tychimba Jess’ *Olio* (2016) which uses the syncopated sonnet to recover the voices of pre-war blues musicians before recorded sound that have been assimilated into white cultural production. In *Olio* the syncopated sonnet opens up a more critical mode of lyric historicity which rescues the blackness of the blues tradition. Since blues records African American cultural practices, history and experience otherwise unrecorded by official historiography, the syncopated sonnet short-circuits the appropriation of the blues to provide a more stubborn historiography of modern poetry’s relation to America’s history of violence.⁶³ At the same time, it renders evident the histories on which a white, privileged lyric subjectivity historically emerges.

“The fantastical coupling of *corpse* and *poem*,” as Diana Fuss writes of the relationship between the twentieth-century American poem and the history of lynching, “denotes an extravagant rhetorical conceit, an impossible literary utterance:” an impossibility that is denoted forcefully by the lynched tongue speaking beyond the grave.⁶⁴ “To give *voice* to a *corpse*,” Fuss observes, “changes both.” In *Olio*, the poet resuscitates the voice of blues singers from “the Atlantic’s hold[...]until my chorus swells like a lynched tongue” in “a fugue of blackface and blued-up arias,” as Jess writes in “Sissieretta Jones.”⁶⁵ The view of lyric poems, as Gillian White observes, “as expressive objects that ‘speak’ to the reader without, paradoxically, the reader’s need to

⁶³ Lorenzo Thomas, *Don’t Deny My Name: Words and Music and the Black Intellectual Tradition* (Minnesota: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 12.

⁶⁴ Diana Fuss, “Corpse Poem,” *Critical Inquiry* 30.1 (2003), 1-30 (1).

⁶⁵ Tychimba Jess, *Olio* (Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2016), 162.

understand anything of the history of the work's production, reception, or circulation" is framed within the cultural logic of lynching, as part of the *longue durée* of modernity that binds the present to the nineteenth-century.⁶⁶ It thus contextualises poetry's modern life form as forged in relation to the crime of lynching itself which, as Jacqueline Goldsby argues, took shape as "racism's modern life form."⁶⁷ If, in *Olio* this voice speaks through the sonnet's doubled voice, in *Citizen* this effect is rendered in the tension between the poems that document the present and the retouched photograph of a crowd partaking in the spectatorship of a lynching in 1930 of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, where the evacuation of the brutalised objectification of the black bodies brings the white spectatorship into view as a reminder of the history of violence that underpins the relationship between poetry's and racism's modern life forms.⁶⁸

Olio's syncopated sonnets position the reader as an interlocutor with ghosted histories whose circular structure is informed by a chorus of voices from "a quiet, small-print litany of churches" which, as Anne Rasmussen notes, "draws a straight, unbroken line of violence from 1822 to the present."⁶⁹ The book's typographical and documentary expansiveness, and its placing of the historical fold at the centre of lyric, position these poems as a counter-history to the history they invoke. In eschewing the violent individuality of the lyric "I," Jess makes palpable how the sonnet itself contains within it at least two competing and intersecting voices (if we are to count the interlocutor as a suppressed voice); a duality that does away with the appropriative power of apostrophe since there is not a "you" addressed to by the "I," but instead two conjoined yet separable "I's" speaking simultaneously. These twinned voices shift lyric's readerly contract as

⁶⁶ Gillian White, *Lyric Shame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2.

⁶⁷ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 333.

⁶⁸ Rankine, *Citizen*, 91.

⁶⁹ Anne Rasmussen, "An Interview with Tyehimba Jess," *Frontier Poetry*, 21 April 2017, at <https://www.frontierpoetry.com/2017/04/21/interview-tyehimba-jess/>

something overheard so that two competing historical sounds are registered simultaneously. *Olio*, whose primary cultural interlocutors are Dunbar and the writer and orator Booker T. Washington, places Dunbar's iconic "We Wear the Mask" (1896) as the central conceit of the poem: as an African-American lyric emerges "on the edge between the mask and you."⁷⁰ The material and conceptual folds of these poems are coextensive with the wearing of these masks, which is to say, with the historical recovery of a fugitive blackness, which exceeds our expectation of the self-evidence of a white, lyric subjectivity so that the poem, rather than fixing the conditions of time and contingency, reveals the uncanniness of the past as it folds into the present. The fold is conceptually suggestive of how, as Jared Sexton writes, "our grand involvement across the color line[...]is structured like the figure of an envelope, folds folded within folds: a black letter law whose message is obscured, enveloped, turned around, reversed," and which is indicative of "the trouble endemic to determining where the white imagination ends and the black imagination begins."⁷¹

The relationship between the history of the blues and the history of lyric is, in *Olio*, as in *Citizen*, brought into crisis, in a poetry that recuperates the appropriation of black music from the past. In the syncopated sonnet "Berlin v. Joplin: Alexander's Real Slow Drag," the ongoing theft of black music and the fetishization of "dark sounds" is articulated through the sonnet's historical present tense:

...I'd just
had the chance to name it: "Real Slow Drag."
I 'spected Berlin was the thief—
—and was right: I knew whom
to blame.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 165.

⁷¹ Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *Intensions* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), 29-30.

The poem is characteristic of how contemporary US black poetics implicates a colour-blind, white liberal readership at the same time that it speaks to a new black collectivity that is not predicated on anything as specific as a “we.” The folds of the syncopated sonnet are embodied in the idea of “the Dunbar-Booker double shovel” that Jess wields in his imagining of a “paradox poem,” which is figured as a Möbius strip “that flips seamless from Dunbar to Booker and back again[...]ad infinitum.”⁷³ Its wager is: it would be impossible to assimilate this poem into a tradition, or indeed to forget the history of violence in the reading of poetry. The documents that detail the continual injury that is done to black life are shown as coextensive with the materiality of the poem on the page. The book refuses the anti-materiality of lyric that extracts death from its documentation so that amongst poems that “blue(s) the blackface in John Berryman’s ‘Dream Songs’” and “‘Blind’ Tom Wiggins’ fugitive songs,” the reader finds pull-out pages that document black victims of lynchings between 1882 and 1930. In this way, contemporary US black poetics situates lyric production squarely against the grain of lyric-reading conventions complicating an expressive reading of it. In other words, close reading this contemporary poetics is probably the least interesting thing that we can do with it.

The preoccupation with finding a genealogical continuity in Jess’, as with Hayes’ and Shockley’s, work propels experimentation. In an interview, Jess explains that *Olio*’s form is indebted to Hayes’ “Golden Shovel,” a poetic form that is written dialogically in homage to Gwendolyn Brooks, which is “part cento, part erasure.” For Jess, as for Hayes, this poetic form provides “a way for historical voices to talk back to each other using the same amount of breath.”⁷⁴ These poetic forms, then, open up dialogue between black poets across time: making lyric address more

⁷² Ibid., 173.

⁷³ Ibid., 214.

⁷⁴ “Tyehimba Jess,” *Lightbox*, 22 Sept. 2016, at <http://lightboxpoetry.com/?p=686>

historically mobile. In her essay-manifesto, Shockley plays on the idea of the post-Civil Rights generation enjoying the freedom of “multiple choice,” trumping the expectation that poets of colour “speak for their race.”⁷⁵ These new genealogical traditions create non-continuous lines of continuity in contemporary US black poetics that reveal the virtuosity of potential uses of traditional poetic forms and open up new lines of continuity between the past and present. Hayes, as Christopher Spaide argues, “has exercised multiple choice to its most flamboyant extremes;” his work “resolves or simply dissolves current debates on influence, the lyric, and the reception of poets of colour.”⁷⁶ As Spaide’s brilliant reading of Hayes’ “Sonnet” illuminates, he strikes most often on originality in sonnet form.

IV. The Sonnet as Weapon

The sonnet occupies a particularly central role in contemporary US black poetics. Its combination of formal rigidity and originality, its distinctive tradition and its adaptation of poetry to the developments of argumentation make it a verse genre that is often taken as poetic form qua poetic form, allowing for plenty of satirising of what it might mean to move within a tradition that assumes “the highest formal expression of lyrical poetry.”⁷⁷ Metaphors of imprisonment and slavery have been central to the imagining of the sonnet as a space of constriction and thwarted desire. The prominence of the sonnet in contemporary US black poetics might be viewed, in its play on the embeddedness of these metaphors in poetic form, as

⁷⁵ Evie Shockley, “All of the Above: Multiple Choice and African American Poetry,” in Keith Tuma, ed., *Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African American Poetry* (Oxford, OH: Miami University Press, 2005), 2-8.

⁷⁶ Christopher Spaide, “Multiple Choice: Hayes’ Response Poems and the African American Lyric “We,”” *Cambridge Quarterly* 48.3 (2019), 231-257.

⁷⁷ Guglielmo Gorni cited in Antonella Francini, “Sonnet v. Sonnet: The Fourteen Lines in African American Poetry,” *RSA* 14 (2003), 37-66 (37).

reckoning with black presence in a genre that has historically been resistant to it. The drive to historicise in contemporary US black poetics, and the stress that it places on a poem written at the interstice of the formal lyric and the visual economy of blackness, is here articulated emphatically as a reckoning with the most conventional, classical and tightly-structured poetic form that has been bolstered by a long tradition.⁷⁸ The sonnet is linked historically to a white humanist tradition that makes the African American sonnet, as Jordan writes, “not natural.”⁷⁹ This unnaturalness is the premise on which the genre’s history is most fully troubled as the transgressive impulse of the African American sonnet tradition overrules the confining impulse of its “original.”

An unnatural formation is embedded in the African American sonnet which is written in a tradition that seems inhospitable to it. “The sonnet,” as Timo Müller writes, “was one of the spaces blacks were supposed to stay out of but ventured into anyway. And many who ventured in[...]did so on the assumption that their mere presence would question the ideology of racial difference on which American culture was founded.”⁸⁰ Jordan’s essay on Wheatley, which she structures as “Something Like a Sonnet,” reveals the dialogic historicism implicit in its contemporary formations: the wager is that the African American sonnet, recast as the definitive American one, will expand to fit everything within its form, transforming a constrictive verse form into a transgressive one. The African American sonnet has, in this way, become emblematic of a black resistance that wrestles with a genre’s history to reclaim its metaphorical sway. The sense of occupying a space is here figured as a way of reoccupying a genre’s history: of revealing how the sonnet’s carceral forms can only be written from the position of a speaker who understands what it means to live as a carceral subject.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁹ Jordan, “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry.”

⁸⁰ Timo Müller, *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 5.

The troubling of this verse genre is connected to the idea of the sonnet as a distinct bounded space in which the defining lines of perception and convention are imagined as crystallising psychically. The sonnet, in its adaptiveness, and in the rule-breaking that has been inscribed into its tradition, is also one of the most flexible of forms, making it an ideal space for innovation that is imagined specifically as the struggle to break free from a hegemonic literary tradition. The sonnet, traditionally regarded as a vehicle for love poetry, is a *trompe l'oeil* of verse genres: the private is always already the political; love is most often a trojan horse for political desire and revolutionary possibility, and vice versa. When African Americans first started writing sonnets, shortly after Emancipation, which Müller dates to Albery Allson Whitman's "Sonnet: The Montenegrin" (1871), the sonnets tended to engage directly with the question of what independence might look like in a nation that had, up until the prior decade, viewed African Americans as three-fifths of a person.⁸¹ In Whitman's sonnet this notion of independence is articulated through the Montenegrin struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire; lyric thus looks to other historical moments to imagine a future historical possibility. The African American sonnet's emergence is, then, deeply entwined with Reconstruction and with a sense of imagining freedom through an occupying and reshaping of literary tradition. Because the sonnet tradition is bound up with imagining independence in the nation, and with balancing individual and collective concerns, it presents a natural space in which to articulate the failed promises of Emancipation. It is a reminder that, as Robin Kelley writes, "the marginal and the excluded have done the most to make democracy work in America." An analogous argument might be made of black thought in the American poetic tradition.⁸²

In the African American sonnet tradition this flexibility of form has provided a staging ground for the difficulty of articulating a black radical tradition in a nation where black death induces a

⁸¹ Müller, *The African American Sonnet*, 3-5.

⁸² Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xi.

constant state of mourning. The mastery of its form in poems that revolve around the oppression of mastery brings the question of race and lyric into a gordian knot that can only be unravelled by the deformation of mastery.⁸³ This revisionary sonnet is expressed most clearly in Wanda Coleman's *American Sonnets* (1994), which brings her caustic, trenchant revisions to the genre to make it something else entirely: something that is inextricable from the question of race in America. This revision, which is central to the grounds on which Hayes formulates his own contemporary American sonnets, figured as a challenge to his past and future assassin, recasts the African American lyric implicitly as American, thus making this revision one that is enacted specifically through a rhetorical occupancy of a genre which brings its history into the present. The African American sonnet rewrites the tension between freedom and restriction as one that is externally rather than internally imposed. In its engagement with freedom and restriction as literal embodied things rather than conceptual ideas – as the reality of the prison industrial complex as opposed to prisons of the mind – it reveals more intensely than any other verse genre how the lyric subject is never simply a personal construct but is always bound up with the violent formations of American social life. Part of the implicating mode of Hayes' sonnets, as with Rankine's *Citizen*, emerges from its interpolating of a "you" who is centred in the place of lyric address. The lyric interlocutor occupies the position formerly occupied by the subject, thus allowing the lyric subject to escape from view.

Hayes' mobile and shapeshifting "you" delivers a whiplash to white liberalism, as it carves out a definition of lyric privacy against "what is inward, is absorbed."⁸⁴ This mode moves address outside of what Jessica Benjamin refers to as the "doer and done to" dynamics in the forcefield of mutual recognition, one that has been most extensively analysed in relation to Rankine's *Citizen*, but which is continuous across contemporary US black poetics. It recognises the

⁸³ For the use of these terms see: Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1987), 49-56.

⁸⁴ Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets For My Past and Future Assassin* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 15.

historical force of the interpolation of racialised subjects: a discursive strategy that has historically transformed people into things. Hayes moves the sonnet outwards from this reductive, all-absorbing white interiority and the next sonnet in the sequence centres the “affective wrinkles” of James Baldwin’s face, as Elizabeth Abel writes of the quality of black absorption into interior space in her reading of civil rights photography.⁸⁵

The camera is a central conceit of Hayes’ work, where it creates a forcefield in which blackness, which is constantly shifting, is presented as uncontainable within a white poetic field. In Hayes’ “Self-Portrait as the Mind of a Camera” from *How to Be Drawn* (2015), the reader is prompted to conceptualise an unending complexity of black interiority, which they cannot reach, and which must be imagined coincidentally with the black image:

Sideways assaults. Hold us, Camera, until we are not as black
As what they called us before they called us what they call us now:
We are blacker. We get to be as elusive as a woman[.]⁸⁶

Black women have historically been afforded more interior space (even as they have been constrained by it) and Hayes’ move here is to acknowledge how a new fugitive form of blackness is entangled with the destabilisation of gender. Hayes positions the photographic lens as the visual structure that is produced through lyric space so that the camera comes to stand in for “what ails the interior.”⁸⁷ The poem, in this way, models a reflexive and resistant model of black interiority. What the black camera as a reconstructed lyric subject allows for is a sense of how race – and its relation to Americanness – has been produced in the field of vision and how, consequently, the contemporary American lyric must write itself along the seam of the visual production of race.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Abel, “Skin, Flesh, and the Affective Wrinkles of Civil Rights Photography,” *Qui Parle* 20.2 (Spring/Summer 2012), 35-69.

⁸⁶ Terrance Hayes, *How to be Drawn* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 86.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

In *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, the first of which was written the day after the presidential election in November 2016, the anxiety that is induced by Trumpism produces a frenetic sonnet that sharpens its edges on the whetstone of the hysteria of contemporary white American politics. Hayes' sonnet sequence teeters on a hysterical mode that weaves blackness, masculinity, history and language into a Molotov cocktail aimed at the president who is referred to variously as "Mister Trumpet," "Humpty-Dumpy" and "failed landlord with a people of color / complex."⁸⁸ The sonnet, fully occupied by blackness, produces the black hysteria that has been contained by its carceral forms. The wager is that a black hysteria, unleashed from the traditional forms that have contained it, will take occupancy fully this time in the form that was designed for the exploration of such carceral structures. Pronominal address in Hayes' sonnets often feels assaultive or accusatory because the entanglement of who is doing the looking and who is being seen envisages the possibility of whites made vulnerable to the gaze. As Hayes writes in the seventh sonnet: "I make you both gym & crow here."⁸⁹ The "you" is at once expansively slippery and historically-implicating. The subject of the sonnet sequence is America itself: the idea of what America is and who it can be represented by. America is positioned as both the addressed and the addressee in a sonnet sequence that Hayes sees as both "a place to be secure but also a place that is under siege and on fire."⁹⁰

In reiterating the Americanness of his form, Hayes implicitly shifts the relationship between African American and American cultural production so that the former is seen as definitive, rather than a subset, of the latter. In the aforementioned sonnet, he exemplifies the complexity that is required to remake the idea of "America" and "American culture" through testing the idea of "America" against the adjective "American." Americanness emerges in Hayes' work as an

⁸⁸ Hayes, *American Sonnets For My Past and Future Assassin*, 34, 48, 31.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁰ Stephanie Sy-Quia, "'I Think of Metaphor as a Gesture of Empathy:' An Interview with Terrance Hayes," *Review 31*, at <http://review31.co.uk/interview/view/28/i-think-of-metaphor-as-a-gesture-of-empathy-an-interview-with-terrance-hayes>

“ideological & material swagger” that can only be seen clearly through the lens of “black male hysteria” which hovers at the centre of these tightly-wrought poems that refuse to shield the white reader from their own unruly emotions and which reveal hysteria as the most affectively conducive mode of reading contemporary American life.⁹¹ The self in Hayes’ sonnets is caught in the act of “trying to be transparent,” resisting the position of the “invisible man which is,” as Hayes notes, “the dilemma of people of color.”⁹² In his book on the poet Etheridge Knight, who wrote during his period of incarceration in the 1960s, he observes, noting the sanitisation of black life in the poetic imagination, that the “demons [...] skeletons” and “hang-ups” need to be part of the American literary imaginary.⁹³ The poet’s own relation to race, gender and masculinity emerges in this sonnet sequence as an effect of Americanness, rather than as something that is seen as extraneous to it. It is this refiguration of what constitutes the “American” that allows for an ambivalent identification with Americanness that is located between the statements: “It is not enough to love notions of America, but it is also not enough to want it destroyed.”⁹⁴

Lyricization in Hayes’ work becomes a way to test what it might mean to think of subjectivity as emerging in a space that is “part prison, / Part panic closet.”⁹⁵ In other words, his work allows us to see what the sonnet has imaginatively been implicated in all along. In recognising the powerful metaphoricity of freedom and containment, it returns those ideas to their literal foundations, making the sonnet a holding place for the contemporary carceral imaginary, where prisons might be thought of in their concrete, brutal, systemic states. Implicit in this move towards actuality is a more measured sense of poetry’s cultural work. Poetry “will not literally free you,” as Stephanie Burt notes, “from a literal jail,” but it might articulate the freedom dream contained by the

⁹¹ Hayes, *American Sonnets For My Past and Future Assassin*, 25-26.

⁹² Williams, “Terrance Hayes on Shakespeare, Ol’ Dirty Bastard and What Makes a Good MFA”.

⁹³ Terrance Hayes, *To Float in the Space In Between: A Life in Work in Conversation with the Life and Work of Etheridge Knight* (Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2018), 14.

⁹⁴ Sy-Quia, “An Interview with Terrance Hayes.”

⁹⁵ Hayes, *American Sonnets For My Past and Future Assassin*, 11.

cultural forms that assimilate the carceral.⁹⁶ Poetry conceived not as written poems but as a cultural revolt is crucial to rethinking the carceral imaginary's bearing on contemporary life, exposing how "culture" and "race" are made to stand in for each other in definitions of Americanness. It is through a sonnet sequence that affectively works through the production of a "black male hysteria," Hayes suggests, that what goes unseen – how whiteness is a way of seeing and interpreting the world, which curtails what might be seen in America – that he demonstrates what it might mean to conceive of "the rock bottom of symbolic form" without "the spectre of blackness."⁹⁷ In this way, it acknowledges that black aesthetics has provided American culture with its most innovative forms, just as Du Bois argues that black thought is central to American ideas of political liberty.

The reader who is able to think themselves into the position of resistance that is performed as the reading of *Citizen* at a Trump rally; the reader who is able to conceive of the effects of carceral structures on American life unmetaphorically: of prisons and poems simultaneously; and to see reparations as the story that needs to be told through the untelling of history, is one that contemporary US black poetics knows needs to be imagined rather than assumed. As Erica Hunt writes: "I have had to invent the person for whom poetry is possible[...]imagining, engaging, and rehearsing in the space of freedom's stuttering and insistent gait toward radical potential."⁹⁸ This reader – and the transformation of lyric into a public mode – is the wager of a contemporary US black poetics which makes lyric unrecognisable to itself. In returning lyric to the history of its genre, by making it unfit for history, this poetics occasions new ways of thinking about what blackness and black culture might be as it moves lyric subjectivity away from the centerground of "man" in the singular to a "we" that can only be structured by its own negation and refusal: to

⁹⁶ Stephanie Burt, "Voluntary Imprisonment," *Slate*, 28 May 2019, at <https://slate.com/culture/2019/05/terrance-hayes-sonnet-poetry-stephanie-burt.html>

⁹⁷ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 3.

⁹⁸ Erica Hunt, "Responses to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde," *Boston Review*, 12 Mar. 2015, at <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/erica-hunt-response-race-and-poetic-avant-garde>

a vision of lyric subjectivity at the edge of sight, fugitive, and constantly moving. In this way, it demonstrates how genre rewrites itself as it unwrites history and how lyric's old private forms might be put to new public uses. Contemporary US black poetics articulates a new model of historicity that, as Alexander writes, "says 'no': not statues, not poems, not rhetoric, but rather life:" and, in this way, works a historical knowledge of America against the history of genre to orient its reader towards a more reworkable future.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Alexander, "New Ideas about Black Experimental Poetry."